



Recruitment of Quality International Students for the Malaysian Private Universities and Colleges

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ABSTRACT

The future strategies of attracting quality international students to the Malaysian private universities and colleges (MPUCs), will no longer be determined by the conventional approaches in marketing; such as, attending promotions, good marketing materials, excellent academic programs, quality teachers and lecturers, pricing, as well as, supportive staff; rather the challenges faced by these institutions could only be overcome if and when new innovative mechanisms are put in place. While I am aware of the fact that, ordinary marketing and competition are healthy ways of conducting business, in my experience, nonetheless, these are inadequate apparatuses in the current tempestuous market environment; therefore, MPUCs must underline their strength, niche, culture and academic line, as well as, social and environmental values; then create your market of which other players have less or no access; focus on your strength, be mindful of your potential and be cognizant of markets that others have ignored; in other words, your recruitment activities need to be homogenous; that is in line with your institutional values; featured, presented and shaped according to your environment and uniqueness; value each student in his/her own way, empower your current international students and international academic staff; send them to their country of origin or any other related country with financial incentives and full empowerment for promotions, be generous in incentives and pay handsome commissions, change your marketing strategies according to the time, country and environment, offer scholarships, but learn how to attract donors and philanthropists, your planners must know how to revise, recast and rescript the past plans and strategies, as well as, forecast the future directions, study the educational policies of potential nations; you must apply the strategy of “your institution to G”, the idea of holistic

education, do not undermine any program, such social sciences, there are a lot out there who are interested; offer summer programmes and be innovative and serious about it and employ the strategy “your institution to the important people in the society”.

Keywords: Private universities and colleges, international students, recruitments, new approaches and mechanisms.

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to advice the stakeholders, managers, academics, administrators and promoters as well as, planners of Malaysian private universities and colleges (MPUCs) on how to recruit quality, fee-paying international students. The paper proposes new approaches, methods and mechanisms to attract academically sound international students. The ideas contained in this paper are non-conventional and effective to attract fee-paying and academically strong international students. It is written in a simple language and in a point form for the understanding of every body in the industry. Provided that these institutions implement these suggestions, they will indeed see the result in few years if not in few months. The objective is to help Malaysia and in particular private universities and colleges in these difficult times. Malaysia is one of the most liveable countries in the world and its educational system remains the best among the Muslim and developing nations; there is no reason, therefore, why Malaysian private universities and colleges could not entice the world markets and lure international students. The strategies suggested here, will indeed, support administrators of these institutions to take proactive decisions, create huge financial resources, save staff time, and prioritise activities, trips, and markets.

2. History Nature and Regulations of Malaysian Private Universities and Colleges

There are 47 private universities and over 34 private university colleges as well as 20 public universities and 10 foreign university branch campuses in Malaysia; with world class educational facilities and environment. Quality higher education is indeed, one of the key developmental programs of human life; in a comprehensive and sustainable manner; it is a vital public good and basic human right. It was, throughout human history, regarded as the game changer for economic, societal, cultural as well as the mindset of people's outlook. Simply put, nations cannot develop or build human capacity and sustainable economy without quality higher education (Ministry of Education Malaysia).

The United Nations (UN) sees it as a vital and significant human right; nonetheless, most world nations, mostly in Asia, Africa and Latin America struggle to provide basic preliminary education; that is primary and secondary education; hence, university and college positions are limited and many nations do not exist for numerous qualified candidates. The private higher education (pHE), therefore was initiated worldwide to fill up that gap (Ministry of Education Malaysia).

The history of Malaysian private higher education (MpHE) is in line with these initiatives and needs. Subsequent to its transformation process, Malaysia has been proactive in providing higher education for its citizens; Unlike before and immediately after independence, in 1957, where opportunities for higher education were inadequately scarce; in fact, there were no institutions of higher education; be it public or private, apart from professional qualifications offering selected programs on certain skills. After various reputable public higher institutions were successfully established in the 1960s and 1970s the government turn its attention to the establishment of private higher education in 1980s (Wan Kamal Mujan, 2014).

These institutions, therefore, provide undergraduate and postgraduate and, in some cases, teach

diploma programs in selected courses. The private education in Malaysia contributes to the nation building process and competes against over twenty well-funded public universities. Some of these private institutions are funded by the federal government of Malaysia directly and some are owned or supported by the government owned or government linked companies (GLCs). Notable of these institutions are, Multimedia University, Petroleum National University (Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS) and National Power University (Universiti Tenaga Nasional). In addition, there are over twenty privately owned institutions of the same nature. And the Malaysian government have given the authority to offer their own programs and confer their own degrees.

The PHEI Act 1996 govern and legislate the Malaysian private higher Education institutions. The act gives the Minister of Higher Education elastic powers; in which he could grant permission to private universities and colleges to run their academic and administrative activities, including teaching, documentations and research, in English. The same Act, provides clear explanations of foreign equity participation in Malaysia and gives the approval powers to the Minister of Higher Education; as it addresses other issues related to the establishment, development and running of the private universities and colleges, including employment, regulation of fees as well as educational standards (Ministry of Education Malaysia).

The National Higher Education Funding Board Act 1997 is another Act which provides loans for students, while Malaysian Qualifications Act 2007 is enacted to regulate accreditation related issues covering all academic programs in Malaysia; be it public or private institution. In fact, the Accreditation Board and the Quality Assurance Division of the Ministry work together to ensure and safeguard the quality of higher Education in Malaysia (Selvaraj Grapragasem, 2014).

3. Recruitment of Quality International Students to Malaysian Private Universities and Colleges

Recruiting quality, fee-paying and academically sound students has been and it will remain to be a mounting task for many private universities worldwide including Malaysian private universities and colleges. Nonetheless, with appropriate mechanisms in place any institution could overcome

it. While facilities, quality of teaching, pricing, and good academic programs, as well as supportive staff are all important factors; there are those issues which are more vital but entirely missed or unintentionally ignored by these institutions to attract best of international students. My focus in this paper will be on how to attract quality, international, fee-paying and academically qualified students; in a non-conventional method.

Malaysian private universities and colleges (MPUCs) face challenges that are common to their counterparts in the world; I will therefore, evaluate, study and propose the way forward to overcome those challenges, so as to attract, fee-paying quality international students in a pragmatic and insightfully perceptive way. While marketing and competition are healthy ways of conducting business, but in my experience and in the experience of others in the field, those are far inadequate mechanisms in the current turbulent market environment.

Each one among the MPUCs need to underline its culture, strength and niche or/and academic, social and environmental values to recruit quality international students. There is no need to respond individually to markets; rather create your market of which other players have less access, since this market is your own creation and your product is uniquely designed you will not be in competition with others; rather with yourself. Simply put, your market directly adheres to your history, institutional capacity, academic environment, and internal culture. In fact, many of us comprehend that market behaviour is unique to each institution but we, most of the time, overlook the reasons.

Another factor to consider is that, you can have the best institution in the world but operating or located in the worst country or continent. I have to bring up this point, simply because, some MPUCs see that the country they operate in plays a greater role than their institution in attracting good international students. Remember, good students come mainly to study and only need minimum form of entertainment or rest; the point here is, no one will suggest to build an academic institution in a desert; rather, the point is that, campus life is almost eighty to ninety percent of

good students and any city could cater for the rest of the needs. So, instead of focusing on the country, while marketing, focus on your institution.

The other point I would like to underscore and share is also related to mindset. While strategizing or studying the markets we usually categorize families and countries into poor, rich, middle class, etc...etc... On the contrary, it should be understood that no family or nation is poor enough not to educate their children and citizens. In my experiences, I went to market for my university in some of the poorest nations in the world and attracted the best government sponsored students; it all depends on how convincing the discussion is, what the client is looking in relation to prizing, and your institutional values. In one instance, one of these nations I visited, which has one of the lowest Gross Domestic Products (GDP), was about to send ten students to Europe but after negotiations and persuasive conversation, they sent twenty-three students to Malaysia.

Therefore, to attract international students the marketing and recruitment activities need to be innovative not traditional, homogenous; that is in line with your institutional values; featured, presented and shaped according to your environment and uniqueness.

Furthermore, an effective recruitment process to boost the number of international students is to value each student in his/her own way.

There are populous nations neighboring Malaysia and also those populous countries which has no physical border with Malaysia but both of these categories of nations are well-known throughout the world, and there are those tinny, rich or poor, nations, some of them hard to figure out on the world atlas; the latter category, most of the time, do not attract our attention, while recruiting international students; this is part of our slipup.

The cultural perspective and exclusivity these types of students, coming from these population wise small nations, bring to our campus is beyond anyone's imagination. Try to organize a cultural night and the unknown beauty of these students from the said nations will mesmerize the entire campus,

leaving a lasting enthrall on the rest of the students and encouraging the management to widen their horizon. The less known is always fascinating.

Another point to be considered is empowering your current international students and international academic staff. We often tend to depend on conventional methods in recruitment; we design professional campaigns, but we may not execute it to the best levels; we send texts, emails, we use the social media and focus on having the best web. These are sensible techniques but second to the approach of sending your own staff to his/her country of origin or any other related country with financial incentives and full empowerment; able to act on behalf of the institution, to issue offer letters, to advocate and to bring with them quality fee-paying international students; although it is about the right message delivered to the right prospects; this approach, nonetheless, creates confidence, belonging and courage. I once told a group of eight prospects, while promoting my university, that I studied in Malaysia and I am now a professor there; seven out of eight signed up without hesitation.

Again, this is not to suggest some traditional approaches will not yield result; rather, private intuitions need to do things differently, be imaginative and inventive, to stay flourishing; in fact, we should grasp prospects and seize all opportunities. It is being predicted that there will be eight million students studying abroad by 2025; and given the opportunities Malaysian private universities and colleges could benefit from this huge market.

If you are using international agents to recruit international students or empowering other agents for marketing purposes be generous in intensives and pay handsome commissions, as this will make you noticed and talked about by them in forums and public platforms.

Additionally, change your strategies according to the time, country and environment. Futuristic solution to the problem of recruiting international students into the Malaysian private universities and colleges would be offering scholarships. In my experience. It is easy to do so,

provided that the institution is skilled enough to master the mechanism. You need not to spend the collected tuition fees on scholarships rather, recruit academically good international students and take their academic results to those great donors and philanthropists. These individuals and organizations may hesitate to contribute to humanitarian activities such as refugees but will not dither to underwrite educational involvement; as they know the values and outcome; at the same time, they will not be seen as contributing to harmful organizations. Therefore, we should not wait to welcome only sponsored students by their countries or institutions.

Malaysia does not have national immigration policy like various other western countries, whereby citizenship process for international students is possible after completing their studies; nonetheless, this should not be a hindrance or pretext for not recruiting the best; as life in Malaysia is comparatively inexpensive; Malaysia also is one of the most liveable counties in the world; it is clean and peaceful.

Another important factor is to have a team of planners, specifically, for this purpose; they revise, recast and rescript the past plans and strategies as well as forecast the future directions, and study the educational policies of potential nations. Here I am not talking traditional planers, this group will not sit, instead they move with transcending messages; they are the same group who do the marketing in and out; advise the management; perform simulations, create scenarios, and sensitively proactive. They understand the world; they see the rising middle class, the projected growth of nations, and educational needs of countries; simply put, they know the culture of others, and the geopolitical as well as economic situations.

Another point, is what I call “your institution to G” this approach is an strategy of talking to governments directly or through their embassies and high commissions to offer and explain our institutional values, draft official and unofficial agreements and if need be use our government to help us on issues that needs their involvement; this is developing collaboration and partnerships; in other words, we need to help those nations and institutions to realize their potential then present ourselves to them.

One factor that most of the private universities and colleges in Malaysia overlook is the idea of holistic education. Instance of this, is the fact that, they mostly side-line social sciences in the curriculum and focus technical or economic programs. There are a lot of rich international students who are not interested or are not able to do these courses, but yet still want to go abroad to study.

There are those, in fact, who are attracted to philosophy, political science and sociology; the scientific study of human society, social relationships, leadership and governance as well as understanding the key political institutions is a key to personality development. In many developed countries science students are required to take several social science courses. The curriculum therefore should be comprehensive enough to accommodate wide range of needs to net and attract diverse international students.

To attract more, offer summer programmes and be innovative and serious about it; do not undermine the importance of co-curricular programs too.

Another point is what I call “your institution to the important people in the society” most of the time we invite politicians and we award them honorary doctorate; but what about if we approach community leaders, ministers, former ministers, religious leaders, company executives, artists, etc... etc... to enrol in our institution to pursue their masters or PhD degrees? This is indeed achievable and they will appreciate it. Once you get in handful of them, they will inform others to join. I did recruit once an ambassador and five other ambassadors followed him in the same year to enrol in the same program.

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